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DEPARTMENT FOR R, AF/E, AND AF/PD

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SUBJECT: IFTAR with Addis Ababa's poorest

### Breaking Bread with the Poor

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¶1. Ambassador and Political Specialist have quietly and without publicity visited three mosques during the past two weeks, meeting with clerics and distributing food to some of Addis Ababa's poorest people during the Iftar breaking of the fast at sunset. While these "Iftars for the Poor" have been done without publicity, the word has spread throughout Addis Ababa's Muslim, where over 35 percent of the 3.5 million population are Muslim. While Iftar meals with the elite Muslim community are important, and the Ambassador continues to do such programs, breaking bread with the people served by the Muslim clerics has proven more effective in reaching out to the Muslim community and underscoring to Muslim leaders that the U.S. takes a deep and continuing concern for the community.

¶2. Religious leaders, from the pro-government Islamic Supreme Council to the Wahabi clerics at odds with the government, have praised our private efforts. They have remarked to the Ambassador in private that even the Saudi Arabian Embassy and Saudi officials have not taken an interest or involvement in Iftar or Ramadan programs with the Muslim faithful and they need to learn from the Americans.

### Interconnecting with the Muslim Community

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¶3. The Embassy began an aggressive Muslim outreach program this Fall with luncheons for Muslim religious and community leaders. They included the clerics from the Islamic Supreme Council, supported by the Government, and religious leaders from Wahabi and other groups not supported by the government. While Wahabi leaders were suspicious of the invitations to the American Embassy -- the very first ever received by the Wahabis and other Muslim groups -- they now welcome the dialogue and fellowship. We have been able to develop positive communication with all major Muslim groups in country. With Islam soon to be the dominant religion in Ethiopia with 45 percent of the overall current population of Ethiopia (35 percent in Addis Ababa), the Embassy felt it important to reach out to the Muslim community regularly and not just during Ramadan.

¶4. After Ramadan, the Ambassador will continue visiting mosques of various Muslim groups. U.S. civil affairs units from the U.S. military camp in Djibouti (CJTF-HOA) have begun, and will continue, to refurbish Muslim schools in Dire Dawa, build wells and other construction projects in eastern Ethiopia, as well as begin projects in Addis Ababa in the Muslim community, in addition to projects in predominately Orthodox Christian communities -- the bulk of projects thus far. The Embassy has been very careful to coordinate and inform the government and religious leaders in both the Muslim and Orthodox Christian communities of our activities to ensure there is no misunderstanding or undue friction.

Comment

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15. Our activities have been met with positive responses but we need to tread lightly around some intra-religious problems such as disputes with the Saudi Government over visas to Mecca. The Saudi Government has placed severe restrictions on Ethiopian Muslims in an effort to advance the spread of Wahabism, as well as to cut down on economic migrants to Saudi Arabia. The Muslim clerics consider the restrictions on visas to Mecca as a source of friction with the Saudi Government and have raised this issue with us. Further, Ethiopia's Muslims are not immune from the views and sentiment of Americans held in the Middle East, and Muslim clerics here have asked us, advised us, and pressed us to become more sensitive and understanding of political issues that affect the Muslim community around the world. They have also raised economic support for Muslim companies and activities in Ethiopia. More than Iftar meals, we have a long way to go in developing ties to the Muslim community here in Ethiopia. End Comment.

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